

# Micro Moral Worlds of Contentious Politics: A Reconceptualization of Radical Groups and Their Intersections with One Another and the Mainstream

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**Micro Moral Worlds of Contentious Politics: A Reconceptualization of Radical Groups and Their Intersections with One Another and the Mainstream\***

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### Micro Moral Worlds of Contentious Politics: A Reconceptualization of Radical Groups and Their Intersections with One Another and the Mainstream

#### Abstract

*The emergence, or resurgence, of radical political groups invariably provokes a struggle between activists, academics, commentators and policymakers over the particular configuration of nouns and adjectives that best correspond to the group in question. While such debates are an integral part of political practice, scrutiny of the claims made within these debates reveals significant limitations in standard strategies of description – most notably their inability to satisfactorily render either the essential cultural messiness and dynamism of contentious politics or the intersections between the so-called extreme and mainstream. We propose an alternative, albeit not mutually exclusive, strategy of description. This entails mapping what we call the micro moral worlds of contentious politics – the patchwork of intersubjective contexts of belief and behavior through which activism takes place. We illustrate this with two empirical cases: The English Defence League in Britain, and Republican Sinn Fein in Ireland.*

Key words: extremism; radicalism; categorization; definition; social movements

## Micro Moral Worlds of Contentious Politics

The emergence or resurgence of radical political groups invariably provokes debate among academics, journalists, politicians and activists about the configuration of nouns and adjectives that best correspond to the group. Such debates centre on the labels used to describe their cause or ideological position – left-wing, right-wing, Islamist, nationalist, anti-globalization etc – and qualifiers such as far, extreme, ultra, alt, radical, neo, new or even “new new” (see Feixa, Pereira and Juris 2009). Label preferences are usually justified with reference to definitional schemata grounded in the academic literature or statements by state or multilateral agencies, themselves subject to considerable debate, and with reference to other groups considered to exemplify the categories under discussion (Berbrier 2002). Definitions and counter-definitions give rise to a competitive process of “cultural cartography” (Gieryn 1999), with contributors to the debate struggling with one another over how to locate the group in the existing universe of actors – turning them into, or resisting their transformation into, a case of *X* or a case of *Y* (Berbrier 2002).

Such debates serve an important heuristic function for policy-makers, practitioners, academics, and other interested actors, enabling them to form swift judgments about the group or individuals they are dealing with – the type of schematic simplification that much human decision-making requires (Goffman 1974; Snow and Benford 1988; Kahneman 2011). This heuristic function is intertwined with a moral function: by situating new groups in relation to existing actors, such debates express and shape moral evaluations of the group and its adherents (Berbrier 2002). Since World War II, for example, the labels “extreme right” and “far right” have acted as a *cordon sanitaire* around actors deemed beyond the political pale, at least in Europe and North America (Eatwell 2003; Mouffe 2005). They also perform a strategic-legal or

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“prognostic” function (Snow and Benford 1988), shaping ideas about what comprises legitimate, appropriate and effective responses to that group.

Yet scrutiny of the claims made in these debates highlights several problems with strategies of definition in which the underlying logic is of allocating a group to a category based on the extent to which it fits a set of pre-defined characteristics. First, movements and groups change over time, adopting more or less radical ideological positions and action repertoires (della Porta 1995; Tarrow 1997). How do we ensure our descriptions can accommodate such change? At what point does a mainstream group become extreme, or vice-versa? In the case of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) and Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland, for example, did their move from extreme to mainstream take place with their engagement with the peace process, through their signing of the Good Friday Agreement or with their acceptance of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) in 2007? Or should we always consider them extreme? Our answers will shape how we view and interact with these groups.

Second, categorizing *groups* as more or less radical or extreme can overlook important intra-group heterogeneity. Within any group or set of groups there are likely to be varied interpretations of their cause and collective identity, as well as diverse tactical tastes (Jasper 2007: 229-250; Blee and Creasap 2010; Blee 2012: 81-108). This can relate to different cliques or factions (della Porta and Tarrow 1986); to particular points in the protest cycle (Tarrow 1997; Koopmans 2003); or to different settings in which activism takes place. Activists may behave, emote and think quite differently depending on whether they are at a street demonstration, a private meeting, a social event or taking part in an online debate (Simi and Futrell 2010).

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One way scholars have sought to accommodate such heterogeneity has been through the idea that social action comprises a front- and back-stage (Goffman 1959), with more public-facing action, such as manifestos, public speeches or media appearances, understood as a more coded front-stage, and internal communiques or private meetings interpreted as a back-stage, in which activists are less inclined to censor their comments or actions (Mudde 2000; Jackson 2011). This has provided a useful stimulus for researchers to look beyond the public-facing activities of such groups. However, as Fennema and Maussen (2005: 117) observe, it runs the risk of a form of infinite evidential regress such that even where “extremist” aspects of the group have not been identified, one can always claim they are tucked away in a back-stage yet to be “discovered”. Furthermore, fundamental ontological and epistemological problems arise if, as is often the case, the back-stage is imagined as a truer version of activists’ beliefs, feelings and motives, since even during supposed back-stage interactions actors might still be subject to intense social pressures. How can we be confident that the more radical statements made by an activist during a private meeting comprise the falling away of their front-stage mask and not an act of bravado born of a desire for the admiration of their peers?

Third, it is often difficult to identify where one group ends and another begins – a basic requirement if we are to develop arguments of the type “group *X* should be considered part of category *C*”. This is particularly the case for groups with decentralized or network structures – increasingly the norm among social movements (della Porta and Diani 2006, 156-61). Most movements encompass an array of groups and sub-groups, the boundaries between which become more or less demarcated over time, and who may act more or less independently of one another (Zald and

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McCarthy 1987). The fact that within movements individuals often claim more than one group affiliation (Carrol and Ratner 1996) further complicates identification of group or sub-group boundaries. When Jo Bloggs disrupts a meeting by her local parliamentarian, is she acting as part of group *A*, part of group *B* or on her own initiative? As such, it is easy for actions to be attributed to a whole group or movement when they are in fact those of a distinct faction or individual.

Fourth, labelling debates that centre on establishing a group's location on a nominal mainstream–extreme axis can distort understanding of the relationship between radical groups and their social, political and historic contexts – a salient issue when fringe political groups appear increasingly able to gain traction within mainstream political arenas (Bail 2012; Minkenberg 2013). Certainly, detailed empirical accounts of radical movements indicate that their ideological and cultural roots are often more intertwined with those of the cultural mainstream than is popularly supposed (Billig 1995; Tarrow 1997; Blee and Creasap 2010; Mudde 2010). Conventional labelling debates can make it difficult to tease out these intersections because they privilege and embed clear categorical distinctions between the mainstream and non-mainstream; simultaneously concentrate analytical attention on difference between the “extreme” and the “mainstream” while inculcating a scholarly culture of seeking “to *prove* the historical continuity and co-operation” (Mudde 1996: 230) of movements identified as extreme or radical; and can erect emotional, reputational and political barriers to the scholarly consideration of similarity and interaction between mainstream actors and the supposed extreme (Blee 2007; Pilkington 2016: 13-36).

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Fifth, while standard strategies of description encourage the production of fairly fixed and stable categories, concepts such as extremism and radicalism are by definition relational – “[a]fter all, a non-violent public demonstration or rally can seem absolutely banal in Paris, but dangerously revolutionary in Pyongyang” (Gupta 2014, 140-1). A failure to attend to the relational nature of radicalism and extremism leaves important questions hanging. How can we talk analytically about the radicalization of mainstream politics? How can we make meaningful comparisons across national contexts or periods of history characterized by different broad political cultures? To what extent do terms such as extreme or radical have functional equivalence when applied to groups drawing on different ideological wells? Is an “extreme right” group’s relationship to the non-extreme right and the mainstream the same as an “extreme Islamist” group’s relationship to the non-extreme Islamist movement and the mainstream; and what about left-wing groups (Busher and Macklin 2015)?

Our intention in this article is not to argue that the type of classificatory debates with which we are all familiar should not take place. They are an integral, even inevitable, part of the political process. Yet we would argue that standard strategies of definition are poorly suited either to capturing the essential “cultural messiness” (Harris 2009) of contentious politics – a point acknowledged by some of the scholars at the forefront of such definitional debates (Eatwell 2003; Bruter and Harrison 2011) – or to the description and analysis of the intersections between radical groups and the societal mainstream. As such, we propose an alternative strategy of description that, we argue, can improve our ability to respond to these challenges.



## **Micro Moral Worlds of Contentious Politics**

The approach we propose shifts the focus of analysis from the group *per se* to the patchwork of intersubjective contexts of belief and behavior across and through which contentious politics happens. We theorize this using the concept of micro moral worlds, adapted from Arthur Kleinman's discussions of "local moral worlds" (1992, 2006). We illustrate this with reference to two groups that have prompted intense labelling debates: the English Defence League (EDL), part of the UK's anti-minority protest scene, and Republican Sinn Fein (RSF), a prominent actor in anti-Good Friday Agreement republicanism in Ireland and Northern Ireland. The EDL case study is informed by 16 months of ethnographic observation and more than three years of more general observation and analysis of EDL activism (Busher 2015, 2017), as well as other published studies of the group (e.g. Pilkington 2016). The RSF case study is informed by the analysis of RSF documents and statements, interviews with leadership and rank and file members (Morrison 2014), and secondary sources (e.g. Whiting 2012). In what follows, we first introduce the case studies. We then discuss the theoretical underpinnings of our proposal and develop this with reference to the case studies before setting out what we consider to be the advantages of this strategy of description. While our discussion here relates specifically to groups many would consider radical or extreme, we believe this strategy of description could also be applied to groups or collective actors not on the radical fringe.

### **Two illustrative case studies**

When the EDL emerged in 2009, in some ways it looked and felt like what would often be described as an extreme or far right group – angry-looking men, many with a background in football-related violence, shouting vitriol about Islam, Muslims and

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their prophet; their marches occasional spilling over into violence, including clashes with anti-fascists and ethnic-minority youths. Yet most EDL activists claimed to eschew racism, defining themselves as a “single-issue group” focused only on “Islamic extremism” and the “Islamification” of Britain; the group boasted members from ethnic minority groups, and during demonstrations it was common to find banners proclaiming “black and white unite against Islamic extremism”, Israel flags and expressions of support for homosexuals – not symbols one associates with the extreme or far right (Copsey 2010; Busher 2015; Pilkington 2016). Indeed, the EDL leadership criticized, and activists occasionally came to blows with, established far right groups including the British National Party (BNP) and the National Front (NF).

The emergence of the EDL gave rise to extensive and still unresolved debates among academics, journalists, policymakers and anti-racist/fascist activists about how to define the group. Some described the EDL as a straightforward continuation of the extreme right or even fascism (Alessio and Meredith 2014; UAF 2015). Others argued that while there were clear ideological and tactical continuities with the established far right, there were also important differences (Copsey 2010; Jackson 2011; Kassimeris and Jackson 2015), while others still favored other descriptors, referring to the EDL as an “anti-Muslim/Islam protest” group or as a form of “anti-Islamic populism” (Pupcenoks and McCabe 2013; Busher 2015; Pilkington 2016).

RSF is the oldest of various so-called dissident republican organisations in Ireland and Northern Ireland, formed after a 1986 split in Sinn Féin. They present themselves as the standard bearers of Irish republicanism; rejecting the legitimacy of the parliaments in Dublin, Belfast and London and any peace agreement that falls short of

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the independent unification of the island of Ireland. Their formation coincided with a paramilitary split in the PIRA, leading to the formation of the Continuity IRA (CIRA). The relationship between RSF and CIRA is however difficult to unpick. It is publicly known, and privately acknowledged, that RSF is the political wing of the CIRA (Morrison 2014: 144), with the two organisations sometimes collectively referred to as the Continuity Republican Movement. Yet they never publicly acknowledge their connection and, in spite of considerable crossover membership, there is not generalized mutual support or sympathy between members of the two organisations (Morrison 2014: 145). In 2009 there was a resurgence of violence carried out by anti-Good Friday Agreement republicans. This included killing police officers and British soldiers, attacks against civilian and economic targets and violent vigilantism within the communities they claim to represent (Morrison and Horgan 2016). RSF's relationship to this violence remains subject to debate.

Within the public and media discourse, RSF and the other anti-Good Friday Agreement republican groups are often referred to as “dissident” republicans because their activism stems from their dissent to the politicization of republicanism through Sinn Fein and the PIRA. Yet this terminology is contested. For some, “dissident” bestows an unjustified air of nobility on groups associated more or less directly with paramilitary activities, and for a time the British and Irish governments, and the PSNI, preferred the phrase “residual terrorist groups” (Horgan and Morrison 2011). Their former comrades in Sinn Fein refused to acknowledge these groups as republican, let alone dissident, preferring the term “micro-groups” (see Whelan 2008). Meanwhile, for some unionists, the dissident label serves to falsely differentiate modern-day violence from that of the Provisionals (Derry Journal 2014).

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Academia is similarly divided. Some argue in favor of “dissident”, albeit they distinguish between violent and non-violent dissident republicanism (Horgan and Morrison 2011). Some however espouse alternative labels such as “republican ultras” (Tonge 2004), while others argue that the “dissident” qualifier is too ambiguous and fails to reflect the heterogeneity of actors, their actions and beliefs (Whiting 2015).

### Societies as networks of local moral worlds

Our proposed strategy of description is conceptually rooted in Kleinman’s discussion of local moral worlds, a term he uses to refer to the “particular” and “intersubjective” “contexts of belief and behavior” that are “constitutive of the lived flow of experience” (Kleinman 1992: 172). They are the spaces of social interaction through which we live our lives develop our ideas, attitudes and feelings about ourselves and the world around us.<sup>1</sup> They are *local* in that they are particular to a set of individuals engaged in a specific series of social interactions. These might take place across a range of spatial or temporal scales: a particular workplace or family (Kleinman 1992), a specific village or site of public service delivery (Meinert 2000; Abramowitz 2005; Schuster 2005), or transnational networks of actors mobilizing around common issues through shared modalities (Busher 2010). What makes them *local* is that they emerge through a series of interactions, focused around a specific place or type of place, institution or set of institutions.

Local moral worlds are *moral* in the sense that human life is “inevitably moral” because it entails the ongoing formation, assertion and negotiation of judgments about what is right or wrong, or has more or less value (Kleinman 2006: 1; Smith 2003). These judgments are expressed and forged through action and interaction –

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whose hands we shake, who we doff our (metaphorical) caps to, when we applaud and when we remain silent, whether we encourage our children to study pharmacy or parapsychology, or when we allow ourselves to grin from ear to ear or suppress a smile – thereby generating emergent situated norms concerning what we should think and say, do and feel (Geertz 1973; Fine 2010; Hochschild 1979; Mische and White 1998). Breaches of these emergent normative orders are likely to attract social sanction, while behavior that resonates with these emergent normative orders is likely to attract social rewards (Mead 1934; Goffman 1967; Fine 2010).

From this perspective, societies constitute “a network of local worlds” (Fine 2010), each with their own subtly different emergent normative orders, i.e. with their own “terms for propriety” (Fine 2010), “ground rules for interaction” (Eliasoph 1999), “feeling rules” (Hochschild 1979) and “interpretive schemata” (Goffman 1974). Meanwhile, most individuals can be conceived of as moving across multiple local moral worlds in the course of their everyday lives – that of the home, the workplace, the place of worship, their local sports club etc – and in doing so, reproducing, negotiating and sometimes transforming these local moral worlds.

### **Radical movements as networks of micro moral worlds**

In the same way that societies can be conceived of as a network of local worlds, we conceive of collective actors engaged in contentious politics as constituting a network of *micro* moral worlds.<sup>2</sup> Most social movements and groups undertake a range of activities (della Porta and Diani 2006: 168-70; Tilly 2008). While the social spaces associated with these activities have elements in common – cross-cutting identity-structures, ideological precepts, emotional rhythms and inter-personal ties around

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which the group coheres (Klandermans 1992; Melucci 1995; Hunt and Benford 2004; Jasper 2011; Summers Effler 2010) – there are also usually important differences (Simi and Futrell 2010). What activists (expect to) think and feel and what they consider legitimate, praiseworthy or improper is likely to vary between a protest march, a fundraising event and a public debate featuring their leaders. This is because the different actions and interactions that take place in these spaces – both between activists and between activists, their opponents, journalists or the police (Oliver and Myers 2002) – spin out more or less subtly different terms for propriety, ground rules for interaction, feeling rules and so forth.<sup>3</sup> The strategy of description that we propose is based on tracing, and comparing the contours of, the emergent normative orders to be found within this patchwork of micro moral worlds.

### *Primary micro moral worlds*

We begin with what we call the *primary* micro moral worlds: the contexts of belief and behavior directly associated with the group e.g. marches that the group organizes, an online forum they manage and so forth. As we now illustrate, even with a fairly cursory account of these contexts of belief and behavior, we can begin to surface important differences in the emergent normative orders of these spaces.

In the case of the EDL (Figure 1),<sup>4</sup> some of the most prominent differences relate to the use or acceptance of violence and overtly racist language across these spaces.

*Figure 1 about here*

*National demonstrations:* These are formal events that attract participants from across the country, sometimes including supporters from cognate groups, and are undertaken

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in liaison with public authorities. At the EDL's peak, they attracted in excess of 2,000 participants, but at other times drew smaller crowds (circa 200-300). They tend to be heavily policed and attract substantial counter-demonstrations. Most are characterized by small- or medium-scale public disorder, and most activists acknowledge that the prospect of it "kicking-off" was at least initially an important draw for many who became activists (Pilkington 2016: 182-6). However, event organizers, stewards and many senior activists usually encourage compliance with police instructions and avoidance of confrontations, meaning there are few opportunities for legitimate or status-raising violence during these events. Most violence occurs either when activists come face-to-face with counter-protestors – when protagonists are able to claim their violence was provoked or in self-defense, or at the end of the demonstration when activists disperse, are less easily managed and many are intoxicated (Busher 2013). Violence is usually limited to throwing projectiles at and occasional fist-fights with opposing activists. Use of weapons is very rare. While overtly racist chanting is not uncommon, stewards usually seek to curtail such behavior, and the performance of taboo gestures, such as a Nazi salute, can result in ostracization or even assault by co-activists (Busher 2015: 113, 2017; Pilkington 2016: 98).

*Local/regional demonstrations:* These are also formal demonstrations undertaken in liaison with public authorities, but are organized by local groups and tend only to attract participants from the surrounding region. The smaller scale of these demonstrations means they are usually less heavily policed, attract smaller counter-demonstrations and have fewer public disorder incidents, although this may vary across the country. As such, the emotional mood is usually more relaxed than national demonstrations with fewer opportunities for what activists deem legitimate violence.

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These events are often described by organizers and participants as “family events”, with violence or racist chanting heavily sanctioned by co-activists (Busher 2013).

*Flash demonstrations:* These usually comprise no more than about 15 activists and are undertaken without liaison with public authorities, meaning there is more direct contact with the public and opponents. These events explicitly challenge and circumvent state authority. Occasionally, but not always, this has included the deployment of more serious violence than that generally seen on official demonstrations, e.g. grievous bodily harm (Busher 2015, 134; Pilkington 2016, 15), without those involved facing significant sanction from their co-activists.

*Disruptive actions:* Some EDL activists periodically undertake actions intended to disrupt events held by extreme Islamist or left-wing groups. These are usually organized offline via mobile phone, and involve a closed circle of trusted contacts in order to minimize the likelihood of police detection. These actions are intentionally provocative. Physical violence, directed at opponents or the building in which opponents are meeting is common and considered justified (e.g. Busher 2015: 18).

*Memorials:* These are organized around symbolically important dates, such as Remembrance Day or the anniversaries of the attacks of 11 September 2001 (New York and the Pentagon) and 7 July 2005 (London). In place of boozy chanting and songs typical of demonstrations, they are characterized by performances of solemnity, such as wreath laying and silences. Most activists adopt a different aesthetic than they do for a demonstration: smarter shoes and sometimes a shirt, even a tie. Unprovoked disorder is very rare and attracts strong sanctions from co-activists. However, incidents of what activists consider heavy-handed policing or provocation by



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opposition groups can generate particularly intense moral indignation, which may be used to legitimize violence and non-cooperation with the police (Busher 2015, 74-96). Such memorials often involve participants from cognate groups.

*Charity fundraisers:* Activists have raised funds for a number of charitable causes, often associated with military veterans. This has included charity walks, public collections, small fairs and sleep-outs. Such events imitate closely charity events organized around the country most weekends for any number of causes, such as animal welfare or a local cancer hospice. An English flag or two might be flown and some activists might wear clothing bearing (usually discreet) movement insignia, but chanting is largely avoided and a relatively high proportion of attendees are children. Physical violence is very rare. These events are often attended by people outside or peripheral to the group, including activists' family and friends.

*Street outreach (distribution of flyers and petitions):* Activists usually wear clothes bearing group insignia, unless deemed unsafe to do so e.g. in an area with a large Muslim population. Activists by and large show courtesy and openness towards the public: speaking clearly, putting forward their arguments using statistics, personal stories and recommending websites. They avoid chanting and build rapport through small acts of respectability, such as helping elderly people or people with limited mobility across roads. Overt racist language is usually strictly avoided.

*Local membership meetings:* These usually take place in a pub or a member's house. Meetings are informal, without minute-taking or formal motions, but provide a space for activists to share information and discuss new initiatives (Pilkington 2016: 43). Deference is afforded to more established activists, but everybody is given an

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opportunity to have their say. There are often discussions about how to reduce drunkenness and disorder on demonstrations. While overtly racist speech is more common here than in public-facing contexts, it may still be sanctioned through direct criticism or, more subtly, through scant positive emotional feedback from other activists (Busher 2017). While not necessarily a popular position, within such spaces some activists have advocated forging alliances with established extreme right groups or with individuals (previously) associated with such groups.

### *Official online communications (official website, Twitter feeds and Facebook pages):*

The EDL has made effective use of the Internet, especially social media, to build support (Jackson 2011). While the material uploaded and distributed via these platforms is often provocative, by and large it focuses on the EDL's core concerns about the supposed Islamification of Britain. References to extreme right groups or white power literature are exceptionally rare, and some national and local organizers spend considerable time moderating Facebook pages, removing posts that express support for extreme right groups or explicitly racist content (Busher 2017). Most of the internet links shared by activists are taken from mainstream news media or websites that explicitly emphasize their not-far-right credentials, such as those associated with the so-called counter-jihad movement (Busher 2015: 110-5).

*Unofficial online communications (personal social media accounts):* Here, local organizers are not able to remove posts, and activists are more likely to share material that strays from the main focal points of their protest narrative. Some activists post material that is overtly racist, e.g. in support of white supremacist groups in South Africa or the USA, although this sometimes results in challenge, hostility or even un-

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friending by co-activists. As such, behavioral norms here are considerably less consistent than in official online spaces, and sanctions less systematic.

Turning to the case of RSF (Figure 2), here some of the most prominent differences across their primary micro moral worlds relate to how activists construct and conceive of their relationship with paramilitary and non-dissident groups.

*Figure 2 about here*

*Cumann:* The cumann is the local branch of Irish political parties, where members debate local, national and international issues relating to the party and the wider movement, decide how they as a cumann will vote in national votes and organize local membership and activities. Each cumann selects two delegates to represent its membership at the Ard Fheis (see below), and to vote on their behalf.<sup>5</sup> The cumainn (plural of cumann) play a significant role, with local positions on policy issues sometimes at odds with the national organizational positioning (Morrison 2016). As such, articulation of support for, or their relationship with, paramilitary groups can vary considerably across cumainn. In a recent 2010 split in the Continuity Republican Movement almost an entire cumann in Limerick led the fragmentation of the organization; largely a result of a locally held belief that the Continuity IRA should be more open to working with other violent dissident organisations.

*Ard Fheis and Ard Comhairle:* The national voice of the movement comes from the organization's Ard Fheis (annual party conference) and Ard Comhairle (national executive). Within the Ard Fheis RSF's political platform is debated among representatives from each of the cumainn, with constitutional and non-constitutional

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decisions made through accumulated votes. It is also where the party leadership is elected. Here members regularly acknowledge their support for, but not connection to, the on-going “armed struggle.” Any references to direct paramilitary connections are however minimized or quickly closed down by leaders and moderators, emphasizing norms about the official national position regarding paramilitary activity. In addition, close observation of constitutional rules and processes, even at times of intra-organizational conflict (Morrison 2014), reinforces members’ beliefs that they constitute a legitimate and organized political party.

*Saoirse (newspaper)*: The primary source of news for RSF members and supporters continues to be their monthly paper, *Saoirse* (Freedom). It is vital to RSF recruitment and positioning. The paper often asserts RSF claims to be the standard bearers of Irish republicanism by contrasting the continuity of RSF political and moral positions over time with that of their republican revivals. *Saoirse* functions however as a movement-wide paper, also hosting news about and statements from the CIRA, Cumann na mBan,<sup>6</sup> CIRA prisoners and others, enabling these actors to put forward their views and claims of responsibility for attacks. By publishing CIRA statements it suggests that the justification for violence still remains (Whiting, 2012), and conveys belief in the legitimacy of all facets of the movement.

*Commemorations*: The Continuity Republican Movement see themselves as the true heirs of the historical Irish republican traditions of Wolfe Tone, Padraig Pearse and others. This identity is enacted through year-round commemorations at graves and memorials across Ireland, including commemorations to mark the 1916 Easter Rising, the birth of Wolfe Tone and the 1981 H-Block hunger strikes (White and Fraser,

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2000). Some participants with a paramilitary connection attend in military uniform to provide a show of strength, sometimes accentuated by an armed salute and a paramilitary parade. Paramilitary exhibitions are generally afforded respect by the non-paramilitary participants, and those not seen to be doing so may be physically or verbally reprimanded by senior members present. Such performances assert the continued legitimacy of paramilitary activity and instill belief in activists' claims to represent a disciplined and capable alternative to Sinn Fein.

*United Ireland protests:* These are public protests organized by RSF and focused primarily on their call for the end of what they refer to as British occupation of the six counties of the North of Ireland. These are often held at events and meetings attended by British ministers or royals. Adopting a strategy of action familiar to many civilian protest groups, participants set out their position through banners, songs and speeches, declaring in their case the necessity of Irish unity as well as denouncing British politicians, the PSNI, the British royal family and members of Sinn Fein. Participants wear civilian rather than paramilitary clothing, thereby further distancing themselves from overt associations with paramilitarism. By enabling participants to remain morally distant from paramilitary violence, these events attract supporters and sympathizers who tend to avoid events characterized by paramilitary rituals.

*Anti-austerity protests:* While the majority of analyses of Irish republican activity focus on their desire for a united Ireland, the organisations aim more specifically to achieve an independent and united *socialist* Ireland (Morrison, 2016). This has led RSF and affiliated groups to engage recently in anti-austerity protests, in particular protests against water charges across Ireland (Republican Sinn Fein 2016), held in

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conjunction with other non-republican, civil action groups and parties. During such events RSF activists make no outward displays of traditional republicanism apart from organisational symbols on banners and posters, and no overt connection is made to paramilitarism (Brady, O'Connor and Sheahan 2014). Rather, their chants and banners emphasize discontent about the political and business elites, thereby contributing to the production of a context of belief and behavior consistent with the wider national, and global, anti-austerity movement.

*Prisoner support campaigns:* The release and a strengthening of the rights of republican prisoners has been a central campaign issue for RSF. Regular protests are organized by the POW Department and other affiliated prisoner support groups, often outside prisons and usually attended by RSF members and the families of prisoners. These protests encapsulate the ambivalent relationship between RSF and paramilitarism. On the one hand prisoners are not always identified explicitly as CIRA prisoners but rather, grounding their claims in human rights discourse, are framed as individual victims of an oppressive state, denied the right to fair trial or political prisoner status and subject to abuse by prison staff. On the other hand, repeated links are made between the current prisoner issue and prisoner protests and hunger-strikes of the early 1980s and, with that, to earlier periods of conflict characterized by extensive paramilitary activity. No paramilitary attire is worn or overt paramilitary symbols displayed. Alongside these protests Cabhair, the Irish Republican Prisoners Dependents' Fund, collects money to support current and former prisoners and their families, playing an unofficial welfare role. Cabhair raises funds and awareness through activities including postal donations, Christmas swims, bucket collections and testimonial dinners. Such activities bear a striking resemblance

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to the fundraising activities of charities across Ireland and attract participants who tend to avoid events characterized by paramilitary rituals or paramilitary symbols.

*Official online communications (RSF website and cumainn Facebook pages).* Items and comments in these spaces generally toe the official movement line. While support in principle for the armed struggle may be expressed, connections to paramilitary activity are in most cases denied. However, on the Facebook pages in particular, the parameters of acceptability vary across cumainn, partly as a function of the extent to which local organizers moderate the pages and the political-normative positioning of those individuals and their cumann.

*Unofficial online communications:* Individual members also communicate using republican-specific discussion forums and through personal social media pages to promote their political beliefs, justify violence, and partake in organizational critiques when campaigns go wrong (Bowman-Grieve and Conway, 2012). Here, members are more likely to deviate from the party line than they are in the official online spaces. For example, it is more common here to find claims about participation in paramilitary activities. However, the justification of violence and attachment of blame for attacks are usually carried out using a pseudonym.

Our argument is that by describing the micro moral worlds in and through which these groups operate we can start to develop a rich and highly granular picture of the emergent movement culture, surfacing subtle yet potentially significant differences in the terms for propriety, ground rules for interaction, feeling rules, self-image and so forth that constitute the lived experiences of activists in these groups. As discussed in the introduction however activists in any group typically engage with the activists and

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activities of other groups with overlapping interests. As such, it is also necessary to look beyond their *primary* micro moral worlds to what we call their *adjacent* micro moral worlds: the contexts of belief and behavior not associated directly with the group, but where at least some activists from the group either participate (e.g. events held by cognate groups), or to which they make frequent reference when developing arguments about their cause (e.g. publications or websites).

### *Adjacent micro moral worlds and incursions into other arenas*

In the case of the EDL (Figure 3), adjacent micro moral worlds would comprise the esoteric contexts of belief and behavior associated with the wider protest scenes with which EDL activists have engaged. These include the online and offline spaces of groups that have marched alongside but sought to differentiate themselves from the EDL, such as March for England (MfE) or the North-West Infidels (NWI); web forums and other online spaces associated with the so-called counter-jihad movement, such as Gates of Vienna and Four Freedoms (Mulhall and Lowles 2015), where some EDL activists often participate in debates; and the online and offline spaces of established extreme right groups, such as the BNP or NF – groups with which a significant minority of EDL activists have previous or ongoing ties.

The EDL's adjacent micro moral worlds would however also comprise less esoteric contexts of belief and behavior, including some of the online and offline spaces associated with the UK Independence Party (UKIP) – a Eurosceptic party usually described as part of the radical rather than far right. UKIP does not allow former EDL members to join the party but, nevertheless, is popular among EDL activists (Archibald 2016). Other adjacent micro moral worlds would include Breitbart news –



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a news and opinion website popular among EDL activists, whose former executive chair, Steve Bannon, was Senior Counselor to President Trump; national charitable campaigns to support military veterans – campaigns supported by EDL activists, albeit they often do not disclose their EDL affiliation for fear of undermining the campaigns' public legitimacy; the comments sections of mainstream online news articles on topics of interest to EDL activists, where some are prolific contributors; and anti-EU protests, where many EDL activists have been regular attendees.

*Figure 3 about here*

In the case of RSF (Figure 4), adjacent micro moral worlds would include some of the contexts of belief and behavior associated with the paramilitary activity and organized criminality (primarily extortion) of the CIRA (Hourigan, Morrison, Windle, and Silke 2017); the youth and female wings, Na Fianna Eireann and Cumann na mBan; as well as contexts of belief and behavior associated with other paramilitary organisations, such as the New IRA, Oglagh na hEireann (ONH) and the Real Continuity IRA. While RSF has organizationally refused to work with some of these groups, individual members have been known to crossover, or at least sympathize with their activities and positions (Morrison 2011). RSF's adjacent micro moral worlds would also include offline and online spaces associated with other organisations within *political* dissident republicanism, such as Eirigi, the 32 County Sovereignty Movement, the Irish Republican Socialist Party, Republican Network for Unity, and the 1916 Societies – groups that oppose the current peace process and Sinn Féin's engagement with the political establishment in Northern Ireland, but who *publicly* disassociate with paramilitary actions. In addition, RSF's adjacent micro

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moral worlds would currently include online and offline spaces associated with the wider anti-austerity movement, as well as transnational anti-imperialist forums that RSF members share with groups such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

*Figure 4 about here*

Once adjacent micro moral worlds have been identified, we propose two analytical tasks (although space limitations mean we do not undertake these here). First, as with primary micro moral worlds, we can describe the emergent normative orders of these contexts of belief and behavior including, where possible, the role of activists from the group under analysis within these spaces (e.g. do they contribute overtly or covertly, are they largely criticized or praised, do they tend to abide by or challenge the local normative orders, are they prominent or background actors, etc.). Second, we can compare between the adjacent and primary micro moral worlds i.e. between the micro moral worlds over which the group has a greater or lesser degree of control.

This analysis of the adjacent micro moral worlds has two primary purposes. It ensures a fuller and more contextualized description of the contexts of belief and behavior in and through which the group operates. While one must recognize that other actors in these spaces might not sympathize or want to be associated with the group under analysis, such spaces are analytically relevant because they comprise possible “interlocks” (Fine 2010) between these groups and other publics. It also enables systematic analysis of cultural convergence and divergence between the group under analysis and other groups with overlapping interests. How similar or distinct are the EDL’s official online spaces when compared with those of UKIP and Breitbart news, and how does this change over time? To what extent do the emergent normative orders of

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street protests organized by the EDL, MfE or NWI differ from one another and over time, and what does this tell us about the evolution of the UK's anti-minority protest scene? Where and when do we find overlap between the primary micro moral worlds of RSF and those of dissident republican groups engaged overtly in paramilitary activity? How, if at all, are patterns of cultural convergence or divergence shaped by policy announcements made by Sinn Fein or the Irish government? How similar are the emergent normative orders of prisoner support protests held by different "dissident" groups – are they moments of movement-wide harmony or discord?

Finally, we must also capture instances in which actors from groups such as the EDL or RSF undertake *incursions into other arenas*: such as appearances, invited or otherwise, on mainstream news programmes or contributions to public debates that fall outside the primary or adjacent micro moral worlds. In the case of the EDL, this would include television appearances by EDL leaders in documentaries or programmes by national broadcast media, or when activists have called radio phone-in shows to set out their positions. In the case of RSF, this would again include calls to radio phone-in shows or incidents where members have managed, usually briefly, to state their positions from the audience of current affairs television shows. Here, the emergent normative orders are largely shaped by actors external, and often hostile, to the group. Of relevance to our analysis therefore would be issues such as the extent to which they comply with these emergent normative orders (e.g. do they abide by the rules of discussion set out by event moderators and enacted by other participants?), and variation between how they position and present themselves in these spaces and the emergent normative orders characteristic of their primary micro moral worlds.

### **Discussion: The implications of a micro moral worlds approach**

Describing groups as a patchwork of micro moral worlds does not preclude arriving eventually at claims of the type “group *X* fits best in category *C*”. It does mean however that before such claims can be made other claims must first be made. These will be of the type “group *X* is directly associated with contexts characterized by behaviors *P*, *Q* and *R* and is less directly associated with contexts characterized by behaviors *P*, *S* and *T*”, from which we might make inferences about the interpretive frames, emotion rules and normative orders characteristic of these contexts.<sup>7</sup> This can form the basis of comparison both between the contexts associated, more or less directly, with group *X* and between those associated with groups *Y* and *Z*, where groups *Y* and *Z* might be cognate groups, opposition groups or groups popularly considered mainstream, depending on the purpose of the analysis. Only then might such claims be used to develop more basic categorical claims about the group.

We propose three ways in which this descriptive focus on the patchwork of intersubjective contexts of belief and behavior can better render the cultural messiness of radical social movements and help generate a more detailed understanding of their cultural intersections with other groups. First, it both compels us to document variation in emergent normative order across these spaces, and enables us to theorize such variation without making conceptually and epistemologically problematic claims about which local normative orders comprise a ‘truer’ or more accurate representation of the group in question.

Second, the description of micro moral worlds provides a robust basis for systematic comparison across groups and over time. This is because: a) it requires a description

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of as full a range of micro moral worlds as possible; and b) it requires an explicitly situated description of activists' practices i.e. within the context of belief and behavior in which they take place. This reduces the likelihood that activists' practices in one context can be cherry-picked to support a particular general interpretation of the group. It also enables description of *points* of convergence or divergence in the practices of activists from different groups without implying overall cultural convergence or divergence between them. In addition, such comparison across the primary and adjacent micro moral worlds of the group in question and cognate or comparator groups ensures that the inherently relational nature of terms such as extreme, far and radical sits at the heart of the analytical process.

Third, underpinned by an acknowledgement that nominal groups operate across and through a range of contexts, over which they exert varying degrees of control, the micro moral worlds approach is better able than standard strategies of definition to accommodate the fuzziness of group or movement boundaries. Rather than providing a picture of a movement landscape characterized by abrupt group boundaries and formal or quasi-formal coalitions, it enables us to conceive of and describe points of overlap and interstitial spaces where actors from two or more groups contribute to the production of a micro moral world without having to suppose any formal or quasi-formal collaboration between them, thereby helping to capture and convey the often ambivalent relations between cognate groups.

## Conclusion

Standard labelling debates are an integral part of political contention (Benford and Snow 2000), and are deeply embedded within media, political and academic cultures.

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Yet analysis of these debates reveals significant conceptual, ontological and epistemological limitations in the strategies of description that underpin them. We have proposed an alternative strategy for describing contentious politics and the actors engaged in it. This comprises, a) conceiving of groups or movements as constituting a patchwork of primary micro moral worlds, b) situating these within a wider tapestry of adjacent micro moral worlds, c) describing the contours of these micro moral worlds through observation of how participants in these spaces negotiate their emergent normative orders, and d) comparing across the primary and adjacent micro moral worlds associated with the group in question and with other cognate or comparator groups in order to describe intra- and inter-group cultural convergence and divergence. This strategy does not, and is not intended to, *resolve* the problem of how to label such groups. It does however enable us to better capture the essential cultural messiness of these collective actors and develop more systematic analyses of how and where they may culturally converge with or diverge from one another and groups usually considered part of the political mainstream.

As well as providing a more granular description of such groups and their points of cultural convergence and divergence with other groups, this strategy of description can also open up new lines of enquiry for scholars concerned with understanding and explaining the practices, patterns and lived experience of contentious politics, particularly if synergies with methodological strategies such as life history analysis (Klandermans and Mayer 2006) and social network analysis are effectively exploited.<sup>8</sup> These include: a) examining the extent to which activists' cognitive evaluations and emotional responses do vary across micro moral worlds, and the extent to which such fluctuations are transitory or contribute to sustained changes in

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an individual's cognitive and affective practices; b) drawing on existing social movement theories to develop and test explanations as to the patterns of variation across primary and adjacent micro moral worlds; c) examining the conditions under which and mechanisms through which tactical or ideological radicalisation within one primary micro moral world affects the emergent normative orders of other micro moral worlds associated with the same group and/or their allies and/or opponents; d) how the range of micro moral worlds associated with a group affects their ability to accommodate a heterogeneous membership and shapes recruitment and desistance pathways; e) whether patterns of cultural con/divergence and participation across primary and adjacent micro moral worlds can be used to analyse or even predict emergent splits and alliances; and f) longitudinal analysis of cultural convergence and divergence between micro moral worlds associated with radical fringe groups and those associated with institutionalized or mainstream actors.

We conclude by pre-empting two possible criticisms. The first is that the application of this approach would be data heavy and resource intensive and, in the case of radical groups, that access to some of their micro moral worlds would be limited.

While this undoubtedly presents a challenge, it is not unique to this approach.

Furthermore, use of social media analysis and the proliferation of video footage available online is making it increasingly quick, easy, and relatively inexpensive to access many of the contexts of belief and behavior associated with these movements (see Collins 2008; Fisher 2015; Innes, Roberts, Preece and Rogers 2016).

A second possible criticism of such a micro-oriented approach might be that it risks “missing the wood for the trees” (see for example Weinberg 1998). We believe that

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this would miss the point that is being made. One of the characteristics of recent research on collective action and contentious politics has been a turning away from grand theory towards approaches that seek to get closer to human experience and ground analysis in an explicit theorization of human action and interaction (Harrington and Fine 2006; Jasper 2010). This is not about turning away from big social or analytical issues but recognizing that the explanatory power of the theories we use will always remain limited unless we embrace and interrogate rather than smoothing out the complexity of human action and the contexts in which it unfolds.

Exploring radical movements as a patchwork of micro moral worlds can provide a picture with considerably more depth and at higher resolution than that with which academics, policymakers and practitioners operate today. It also has the potential to create opportunities for important critical reflection on ontological categories that currently dominate, and we would argue sometimes stymie, thinking in this area.

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<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, while the assumptions, beliefs and affective structures that are expressed, formed through and shape human action always reflect the biographies of the participants in the

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interaction (Goffman 1983; Katz and Alegria 2009; Fine 2010), they are not “fixed” in the individual nor are they “acontextual”, but are conceived of as being produced “in a relational process that can shift in interaction” (Katz and Alegria 2009: 1239; also Mische and White 1998).

<sup>2</sup> We prefer “micro moral worlds” because it better reflects the proposed scale of analysis and leaves the possibility of conceiving of “local moral worlds” that encompass whole groups or movements.

<sup>3</sup> We understand these actions and interactions as being shaped by, and shaping, actors’ interpretations of political opportunities (Benford and Snow 2000), the logics of specific strategies of action (Tilly 2008), emergent collective identities (Polletta and Jasper 2001; Busher 2017), emotional cultures (Summers Effler 2010), and the extent to which actors from more or less radical factions hold sway within those spaces (della Porta and Tarrow 1986). In this article however our primary concern is with effectively *describing* rather than *explaining* variation.

<sup>4</sup> In the diagrams the micro moral worlds have, as far as possible, been positioned alongside other micro moral worlds relating to similar types of activities. In the RSF case, they are grouped by whether they pertain to protest, communication or core institutional processes. For the EDL, they are grouped by whether they are online or offline and the extent to which they are managed by national or local organisers. They could however have been grouped in other ways, such as by similarity of emergent normative orders or by similarity of participation profiles. We believe the latter of these could offer rich analytical insights about intra- and inter-movement dynamics, but would require a social network analysis beyond the scope of this article and for which the data are not currently available.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Geraldine Taylor, October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Cumann na mBan is a female only republican paramilitary group directly linked with the IRA.

<sup>7</sup> We recognise that the display of emotions might not be the same as what is felt (Jasper 2011, 14), but the inferences we propose at this point would only be about the emotion rules.

<sup>8</sup> Our thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing out the potential synergies between the description of micro moral worlds and network analysis.